



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Voluntary Report - public distribution

Date: 8/1/2005

GAIN Report Number: HK5023

Hong Kong

Livestock and Products

China's Sichuan Province Suspended its Frozen Pork Exports to Hong Kong

2005

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Report Highlights:

The high mortality rate of human *Streptococcus suis* cases in China's Sichuan province has caused concern in Hong Kong. Pork consumption has declined by 30 percent. Legislators and trade representatives pushed the government to ban frozen pork imports from Sichuan province. Initially the government responded that they lacked scientific grounds to ban Sichuan's pork exports to Hong Kong. It, however, later announced on July 28 that the mainland authorities had suspended frozen pork exports from Sichuan province in response to Hong Kong government's concern. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong government has stepped up inspection and surveillance measures at the import and retail levels for pork imports from China and has remained vigilant in all fronts connecting food safety, human and animal health.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Hong Kong [HK1]
[HK]

Summary

China announced on July 28, 2005 that it would suspend all its frozen pork exports from Sichuan province to Hong Kong with immediate effect following almost 200 human cases of streptococcus suis infection in Sichuan. (China currently does not have any chilled pork exported to Hong Kong.) Initial epidemiological and laboratory investigations in the Mainland suggested that the affected people were suffering from streptococcus suis infection related to slaughtering or handling of infected pigs. Hong Kong legislators criticized the government for not taking the initiative to ban frozen pork from Sichuan, compared to its decisive action in banning beef from Japan, Canada and the U.S.A. due to BSE. The Hong Kong government maintained that they have no scientific grounds to ban pork imports due to streptococcus suis as it is common for pigs. Hong Kong recorded a total of 11 Streptococcus suis infection cases since May 2004. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong government has strengthened inspection and quarantine work for imported live pigs and pork from various provinces of China.

Background

On July 23, Hong Kong's Center for Health Protection (CHP) indicated that it was closely monitoring developments concerning reports of deaths due to unknown cause in Sichuan. According to China's Ministry of Health (MOH), a total of 80 people were affected and 19 of them died as of July 24. On July 25, MOH informed CHP that the affected people were suffering from streptococcus suis infection related to slaughtering or handling of infected pigs.

The incident has been widely covered in Hong Kong's media as the number of human infected cases in Mainland China keeps rising. Based on MOH's notification, CHP announced that the total number of people affected was 181 as at July 31. Among the patients, 34 died and 17 were discharged. The mortality rate of almost 20 percent has caused concern in Hong Kong.

According to Sichuan Animal husbandry and Food Bureau, the infected pigs were found in Ziyang city and Neijiang City in the Sichuan Province. As at July 25, 469 pigs and 1 goat were killed by the disease and they were scattered across about 300 small farms.

Hong Kong recorded a total of 11 human Streptococcus suis infection cases since May 2004. It was reported that the CHP and the Hospital Authority are planning a study to look at the pattern of cases admitted to hospitals in the last two years.

Consumers' Reaction

The two major supermarket chains in Hong Kong announced on July 24 that they suspended sales of frozen pork imported from Sichuan. Consumers' confidence in pork consumption has been slashed. Reportedly, retail sales of pork have declined twenty to thirty percent. The sale of live pigs locally also dropped 20 percent. Despite the fact that Chinese authorities suspended pork exports from Sichuan after July 28, Hong Kong consumers are afraid that Sichuan pork can still be exported to Hong Kong via other provinces.

Legislators, meat retailers and local farmers urged the Hong Kong government to ban frozen pork imports from Sichuan province in order to rebuild consumers' confidence in pork. Legislators questioned why the government did not ban Sichuan's frozen pork exports to Hong Kong as decisively as they banned beef imports from Japan, Canada and the United States when these countries had BSE cases. They challenged the Hong Kong government is adopting a double standard because of political considerations.

Government's Reaction

In response to the concern of the Hong Kong government and as a precautionary measure, the Mainland authorities have suspended the export of pigs, sheep and their meat products from the cities of Ziyang and Neijiang (two infected cities in the Sichuan province) with effect from July 25. This was followed by the suspension of frozen pork exports from the entire Sichuan province announced on July 28.

The Hong Kong government, however, did not take the initiative to ban frozen pork exports from Sichuan. A government official explained that they do not have sound scientific grounds to ban frozen pork exports from Sichuan. Hong Kong cannot take independent action but to consider international regulations and OIE (World Organization for Animal Health) standards. The official also admitted that the current system would not allow traceability of frozen pork exported from China.

Meanwhile, an interdepartmental task force has been established to map out strategies and control measures to deal with the evolving situation. Members include officials from the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the Department of Health.

The Hong Kong government has taken the following precautionary measures in the area of food safety to reduce the risk of an outbreak in Hong Kong and to guard against the disease.

- The FEHD will strengthen inspection and quarantine work at the points of entry for imported live pigs and pork from various provinces of the Mainland as well as the ante-mortem and post-mortem inspection of pigs in slaughterhouses. Frontline staff are reminded to be alert to report any abnormality.
- A three-member Hong Kong medical team has been dispatched to obtain the epidemic situation on ground.
- The FEHD has stepped up inspection and enforcement at the retail level against improper handling of pork and other meat.
- The FEHD and AFCD have also stepped up laboratory tests on pigs produced locally and imported from the Mainland.
- AFCD has also alerted pig farmers to monitor their own health and report any outbreak of diseases or obvious increase in the mortality rate of their pigs to the AFCD.
- Hospitals are advised to report any suspected *Streptococcus suis* cases.

Statistics

It was reported that from January 1 – July 22, Sichuan exported 18,000 MT of frozen pork to Hong Kong, of which 5,000 MT came from the two infected cities: Ziyang and Neijiang.

Table 1: Hong Kong's Imports of Pork (including offals and processed pork) in value, US\$ million

Country	2002	2003	2004	% Share		% Change	
				2002	2003	2004 - 04/03 -	
--The World--	448	493	564	100	100	100	14
China	150	166	193	34	34	34	16
Brazil	71	71	90	16	14	16	26
United States	40	50	46	9	10	8	-9
Denmark	28	40	43	6	8	8	8
Netherlands	29	29	39	6	6	7	36

Table 2: Hong Kong's Imports of Pork (including offals and processed pork) in Quantity

Country	MT, 2002	MT, 2003	MT, 2004	% Change	
				- 04/03 -	
--The World--	416,017	469,830	454,711	-3	
China	93,364	110,501	119,904	9	
Brazil	58,337	60,813	61,290	1	
Germany	46,736	67,042	52,178	-22	
Denmark	44,023	56,667	47,736	-16	
Netherlands	36,065	34,717	43,111	24	
United States	39,981	47,343	32,573	-31	

Table 3: Hong Kong's Retained Imports of Pork (including offals and processed pork) in Quantity

Country	MT, 2002	MT, 2003	MT, 2004
Imports	416,017	469,830	454,711
Re-exports	213,153	249,477	202,380
Retained Imports	202,863	220,353	252,331

Table 4 : Hong Kong's Supply of Live Pigs in 2004

	2004 (head)	2004 (MT)
Imports	380,850	32,785
Local Supplies	1,874,832	118,109
Total	2,255,682	150,894

Table 5 : Consumption of Pork Products vs Freshly Slaughtered Pigs in 2004

Retained Imports in carcass-weight-equivalent	381,020	72%
Live pigs	150,894	28%
Total	531,914	100%

Note: Retained imports in carcass-weight-equivalent using 1.51 conversion factor.

Table 6 : Hong Kong's Imports of Frozen Pork in value, US\$ million

Country	2002	2003	2004	% Share		% Change	
				2002	2003	2004 - 04/03 -	
--The World--	204	222	283	100	100	100	28
China	95	108	133	47	49	47	24
Brazil	57	58	72	28	26	25	24
Vietnam	15	14	30	7	6	11	118
Netherlands	12	10	12	6	5	4	16
Germany	8	10	10	4	5	4	2
Canada	6	8	8	3	4	3	4
Denmark	4	6	8	2	3	3	34
United States	3	3	4	1	1	2	38

Table 7 : Hong Kong's Imports of Frozen Pork in Quantity, US\$ million

Country				% Change
	- MT - 2002	- MT - 2003	- MT - 2004	- 04/03 -
--The World--	168,111	192,077	207,316	7.93
China	64,796	76,776	86,499	12.67
Brazil	42,587	45,945	44,781	-2.53
Germany	15,093	19,239	18,654	-3.04
Vietnam	9,780	9,055	16,788	85.4
Netherlands	11,576	10,009	11,855	18.44
Denmark	7,488	11,772	11,422	-2.98
Canada	9,420	12,006	9,159	-23.71
United States	1,856	1,909	2,513	31.69

Table 8: Hong Kong's Retained Imports of Frozen Pork in Quantity

	- MT - 2002	- MT - 2003	- MT - 2004
Import	168,111	192,077	207,316
Re-export	33,987	43,068	39,239
Retained	134,124	149,008	168,078

Source : Hong Kong Census & Statistics Department – World Trade Atlas